

## **Bolstered by robust union, Cape health care jobs coveted**

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September 01, 2008 6:00 AM

Tammy Lawler's job as a medical secretary at Cape Cod Hospital has her old job as a hairdresser beat on several counts.

As a hospital employee, she gets health benefits, generous vacation time and tuition money for classes or training in health-related fields.

"That's what brought me to the hospital — the benefits and the wages," said Lawler, a Dennis resident and the mother of two sons.

She credits her ability to earn a living on Cape Cod not only to Cape Cod Healthcare Inc., the parent company of Cape Cod and Falmouth hospitals, but also to the hospital workers union.

The union has a long name — 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East — and it's accomplished a major objective. "It gives me a voice," said Lawler, a union delegate.

With approximately 4,600 employees, Cape Cod Healthcare Inc. is the Cape's largest employer. And about 3,000 of the employees are represented by unions, chiefly 1199SEIU, whose ranks include housekeepers, nursing assistants, dietary workers and laboratory and X-ray technicians.

The SEIU pay scale starts at \$12 per hour and tops out at \$53, and workers have benefits including sick days and pension plans that are the envy of many other employees on Cape Cod. Three years ago, the union created a pool of tuition monies that buttresses its career ladder program.

"It definitely created not only a middle class but a place where minority workers could make a living and move up," said William Pastreich, the union organizer who brought SEIU to Cape Cod Hospital in 1975.

Even with the recently announced layoff of 169 positions at Cape Cod Healthcare — including 76 SEIU jobs — the union is there to stay, said union members and hospital officials.

### **Lobbying power**

To the hospitals' benefit, the union has the ability to mobilize 32,000 members across the state to petition the government for better reimbursement rates for hospitals and other issues, said Michael Foley, a Falmouth attorney who is also chief labor negotiator for Cape Cod Healthcare.

SEIU members have picketed an ambulatory surgical center in North Falmouth they say is taking business away from the local hospitals, and they helped lobby for the successful passage of legislation that will slow the growth rate of these doctor-owned centers.

For its workers, the union is the vehicle that gives clerical workers, housekeepers and other nonmedical personnel the opportunity to earn a living wage and to advance in their careers.

Bernard Bowens was a cook in local restaurants looking for better hours and better treatment before starting work at Cape Cod Hospital 21 years ago.

At first he cleaned floors, dishes and pots, but he advanced to a job as an X-ray clerk after taking courses in medical language and typing.

When a good-paying job as a cook in the dietary department opened up, he jumped at the opportunity. "It most definitely pays better" than the restaurant job, said Bowens, who owns a condo in West Yarmouth.

"The benefits you can't beat. The union has helped many families, especially on Cape Cod, where the cost of living is so high," said Bowens, who has a 26-year-old son and a 19-year-old daughter.

## **Nursing homes on board**

And it's not just hospital workers who benefit from belonging to the union, said Linda Mumford of West Yarmouth.

She works at Eagle Pond Rehabilitation and Living Center in Dennis, one of four SEIU nursing homes on the Cape, and also helped organize personal care attendants, who are currently negotiating their first contract with the state.

"I saw the need for these people to have benefits," said Mumford, who also works part time as a personal care attendant. "I was getting mine at the nursing home, from a contract the union helped negotiate. For decades they weren't getting any paid time off and no insurance was offered to them."

With or without unions, most hospitals will go to great steps to keep pay for nurses and technicians competitive, said James "Joe" Kirkpatrick of the Massachusetts Hospital Association. He said there is a shortage of workers for those skilled jobs.

But the unskilled workers face a much tougher economic situation without union support, Pastreich said.

When the bearded, Brooklyn-raised social worker with the fisherman's cap arrived on the Cape over 30 years ago, hospital housekeepers were paid a minimum wage of \$2 per hour, he said. "If you were there eight years you made \$2.08. It was a gold mine for doctors and terrible for workers."

## **Militant roots**

Terry Grue, 67, of Brewster had been getting regular raises at Cape Cod Hospital, but he was dismayed by how a supervisor's whim could end careers.

He liked the strength in numbers he saw with the union and eventually became a local president. He is now a union delegate who, along with Bowens, helped negotiate the last union contract.

"For our future, we needed strength," Grue said. "It took a lot of rallies. A lot of marches. It was very militant at the outset."

The firing of a dietary worker for allegedly stealing a jar of gravy helped galvanize the workers at Cape Cod Hospital, said Pastreich, who left the Cape in 1996 and now organizes construction workers in California and other Western states for the AFL-CIO. He figures he got arrested about 15 times, including three times in one day at Cape Cod Hospital.

One thing the SEIU never did was strike, although the nurses did at Cape Cod Hospital in 1981.

Formerly an AFL-CIO affiliate, the SEIU is now part of an organization called Change to Win, and its negotiating tactics, at least according to old-timers like Pastreich, have become somewhat tame.

In the last contract, negotiated in 2005, the SEIU and Cape Cod Healthcare crafted a unique alliance in Massachusetts in which they shared information and weighed options, Foley said.

And they did it "without getting hostile or militant," Bowens said.

The first contract negotiated in this manner created an unprecedented four-year contract, said Jerry Fishbein, head of the local 1199SEIU. "We kept our health insurance intact and the education portion of it. We didn't lose any ground. We got several raises over the four-year period."

Pastreich, who currently lives in San Francisco, said the union still needs to be prepared to fight for its members, especially given the upcoming layoffs.

Cape Cod Healthcare is going to be in for a surprise once it starts the "bumping" process Sept. 8, he said. Nonunion members and managers who are laid off are without recourse, but union members can use their seniority to "bump" into other jobs for which they are qualified, including higher-paying jobs.

It's a time-consuming process, Pastreich said. And he thinks by the time it's over, Cape Cod Healthcare officials "are going to be surprised there won't be as many layoffs as they anticipated."

## Strength in numbers

The SEIU is the largest union on the Cape, with more than 2,000 members employed at Cape Cod Healthcare, the parent company of Cape Cod and Falmouth hospitals, and another 1,000 workers at other health facilities in the area.

- 1199SEIU members at Cape Cod Healthcare pay 1.99 percent of their salary toward union dues.
- Areas of Cape Cod Healthcare that are organized by SEIU are the two hospitals, C-Lab and Cape Cod Human Services.
- Outside of Cape Cod Healthcare, the SEIU represents workers at four Cape nursing homes: Eagle Pond Rehabilitation and Living Center in Dennis, Windsor Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Yarmouth, Harborside Healthcare in Falmouth and the Pavilion in Hyannis.
- It also represents workers at Our Island Home and Nantucket Cottage Hospital on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard Hospital, Windemere nursing home and Martha's Vineyard Community Services on Martha's Vineyard.
- Cape Cod Healthcare also hosts two other unions, the Massachusetts Nurses Association, with more than 1,000 members, and International Union, Security, Police and Fire Professionals of America, which represents 25 workers.